

Pentecost 20 – Wesley 9am & 10.30am – 14th October 2012

Theme: “Jesus teaches about wealth and entering the kingdom of God.”

Text: Mark 10:17b “What must I do to inherit eternal life?”

Introduction

Some people think to be a person of faith is to be a person who has overcome the tough questions. For many, to accept something ‘on faith’ is to accept something without question. However this is not the way Scripture depicts those either following God’s ways or seeking to follow God’s ways, operate. Over the past couple of Sundays our Old Testament readings have come from the book of Job. Here deep questions of God are asked:

- Why do the good people suffer?
- Why do the wicked seemingly prosper?
- If God is love and wants the best for us why do we experience pain and suffering in life?

Job’s questions have occupied some of the best human minds down through the ages. In fact, that’s one reason why many people love the book of Job. It is a part of the Bible that blesses the questions – sometimes deep, unnerving and even faith threatening questions.

Today’s Gospel has within it a number of questions so let us look a little closer at the Marcan passage from chapter 10:17-31.

Mark 10: 17-31

We read of a rich man who ran up to Jesus, knelt in front of him and begged for the secret of eternal life. “What must I do to inherit eternal life,” he says in vs 17b.

Jesus responds to the man’s question with an answer that’s in the form of a series of strong imperatives: ‘Go ...sell ...give ...follow.’

A few observations about this encounter:

1. Jesus answers the man’s question. He doesn’t ridicule the man for his question but he focuses upon the individual. Mark says ‘Jesus loved him – had compassion for him and took his question seriously.’
2. However Jesus does not respond to the man’s direct question. He reframes the man’s question and goes deeper into the individual. In a sense pushing his motive behind the question and personalising the situation.
3. Jesus, in his answer, puts another more pressing question to the man. He has come enquiring about the deep but vague subject of ‘eternal life’. Jesus transforms this theology into ethical decision making for the individual. He asks, “Will you lay aside your wealth to come and follow me?’

Then we read “At this the man’s face fell. He went away sad, because he had great wealth.” vs 22

The one thing standing between him and his relationship with God was his wealth. He was leading a good life, Jesus even loved this individual for his questioning mind and yet there was that barrier that stopped his faith relationship. He was not prepared to sacrifice his wealth and put his spiritual life first. He chose the money and not God.

John Wesley wrote that it is hard for the rich to be good Christians, since it becomes too easy for them to trust in their wealth and not to think that they need to trust in God, too easy to love the world when surrounded by all its allurements, and too hard to escape pride in a society that so values wealth. This was written almost 250 years ago and it has only got worse in our western world. We have so much that can and does become between us and a living faith. Wealth is simply one of those other gods today. We may well think of many others including sport, recreation generally, social pursuits, business and busyness that lead us away from our faith relationships. Without hesitation, I say that materialism, a trust in all that money can offer, is an incredibly insidious threat to authentic Christianity which we see present today in Australia and this portion of Scripture from so long ago reminds us to be on our guard.

In my relatively short time in East Timor as a Chaplain in 1999/2000, I was amazed to see burnt out churches full to overflowing, both Catholic and Protestant. The people had nothing physically but spiritually they appeared strong in their faith in the midst of destruction all around. The picture I have in my mind is one of churches overflowing and people listening by the windows outside, so great was their desire to hear the Word of God and to share in Christian community. With their lack of possessions, faith had become incredibly important. We can learn from this.

Then we read that the disciples were amazed with this result with the rich man and Jesus' teaching about how hard it is for a rich person to enter the kingdom of God. They said to each other, "Who then can be saved?" vs 26b Jesus obviously heard them talking to one another and says; "With man this is impossible, but not with God; all things are possible with God." vs 27

Jesus has used the analogy of a camel trying to go through the eye of a needle. An impossibility!! A ridiculous thought. Some scholars have tried to explain this away, but the reality is that Jesus was indeed making this statement to show in people's ways, wealth can't buy you eternal life. Quite the opposite, it may well place barriers between us and God that only by God's grace can they be overcome. However, attitudes to impediments that block our spiritual relationships can be altered and we can do a little about that. But ultimately, it is only by God's grace that we are saved.

The disciples were still learning this and that following Jesus was not what they had initially thought it would lead to – riches, power, control but rather

servant-hood along with persecution. Not quite what they had imagined or what they thought they had signed up to in following Jesus.

The reality of Jesus' teaching in today's Gospel is found in the last verse of the passage: "But many who are first will be last, and the last first." vs 31
What a struggle for the disciples to understand and also for us to understand today.

Conclusion

Let us be assured that God is not threatened by our questions. However we may not always get the answers we want to the questions we have – but let's not stop asking them.

In my years as a Chaplain both in the Navy but also as a mine chaplain and sport's chaplain I would hear questions like "How can I believe in the virgin birth of Jesus?" or "Is it possible for a modern, scientific person like me to take the Bible seriously?"

I learned the hard way that it was important for me to put to them a question of my own: "What difference does the answer make to your life?"

Sometimes the way we resist the claims of the Gospel is through a barrage of theoretical, pointless questions, the answers to which make no real difference to us. We are simply trying to avoid a spiritual relationship. While the question we ask may be "How can a sophisticated person like me believe in the Bible?" the real question may need to be, "How would my life have to change if I really followed Jesus as my Lord and Saviour?"

Suddenly we may be challenged by imperatives like: "Go ...sell ...givefollow" that challenge us in both our faith and life choices.

This is the Gospel for today and every day. Amen!